I’m Not Stupid.
I’m Ignorant.

A Humble Tutorial on Writing for a Lay Audience
I’m Not Stupid. I’m Ignorant.

I finished my MA in Sports Psychology in December of 2013 and was lucky enough to land a job writing a weekly column for the 60 million users of MyFitnessPal. That was also when I started the Habitry blog for professionals who wanted to learn more about health psychology research. Between MyFitnessPal and Habitry, I was churning out 1,400-3,000 words a week on the topics I was most passionate about: habit formation, willpower, motivation, and the tools of behavior change for both a lay (end user) and professional-lay (practitioner) audience.

And I sucked at it.

I started blogging in 2007 when I went to work for a blogging company. I wrote a Batman screenplay in High School. I wrote upwards of 100,000 words in graduate school assignments and I even wrote a book, Intervention, with my mentor, Dan John in 2012 and my own book, We Make Communities, in 2015. But it wasn't until I had an editor that I learned to do it well.

THERE’S AN OLD STEPHEN KING JOKE FROM HIS OPUS, ON WRITING: “TO WRITE IS HUMAN, TO EDIT IS DIVINE.”

Since I’ve now been the editor for The Motivator, I thought I should collect what I’ve learned into a document that will help new writers select and arrange their words into sentences that will connect with the audience who will be reading, and sharing their
work. And I will tell you that every lesson I have learned and recorded here is a lesson that I learned the hard way.

So in short, don’t do what I did. Do this instead.

1) **Know who you’re writing for.** Yeah, it sounds simple. But man, is it hard. And it was harder for me because I thought I was writing for me 6 years ago (turns out that not all personal trainers are on the cusp of giving it up for a graduate education in health psychology). If you are writing for a lay audience, do not assume they are you a few years ago. Most people reading your writing will not want to burn their lives down to become personal trainers. As much as you want to nerd out, they want “tips” and “tricks.” And holy shit, do lay people love bullet points. The only instructions my editor at MFP would give me before I wrote an article was how many bullet points it should have. And yes, the rest of this article is just bullets because don’t lie, you love them, too.

2) **Keep writing for them.** The biggest mistake I see personal trainers with blogs make is they start writing blog posts that are really just long-form rebuttals to fights with other trainers they lost on Facebook. And yes, I know that’s what’s happening because I did it. No one who will ever pay you money will read that. So don’t do it. I know it will be hard because after a few dozen posts on tips and tricks to eat less and move more, you’ll start to feel like you’re spinning your wheels. Then you remember that Dan John has been giving the same advice for 40 years, but manages to write 3 books a year with simpler, better, more awesome versions of that
advice in every one. Make the repetition a challenge to always be making that “same advice” better, simpler, and more clear with each post.

3) **Assume the best intentions.** People who have taken the time to read your writing are empathetic, experienced, intelligent, and dedicated humans who want to get better at shit. Statistically, most of them are probably women. Many of them are LGBT. And everyone of them started reading your blog post with the intention of learning something to make their health and fitness journey easier. I’m telling you this because it’s easy to get cynical. When you sit down to write, assume your reader has taken the time to sit down and read with an open mind.

4) **Assume their intelligence; not their educations.** I made the mistake for years of trying to use the correct academic words for stuff. But it only made people gloss over. Now I use “motivation” where I should use “inspiration.” And I use “habit” where I should probably use “intention.” Because that’s the words my readers use. If you explain what you mean when you use a word, they’ll get it, but you have to use the words their used to or they’ll just gloss over things.

5) **Pick one idea.** My editor for MyFitnessPal looked at my first blog post and told me, “this is 5 blog posts.” I was actually elated because I didn’t have to come up with ideas for another 4! So pick one idea for the readers to take away.

6) **Put that one idea in a sentence.** My editor once told me, “everyone reads something because they wanna feel smart.” The readers of Habitry (like all of us) want to feel smart. So help them out by taking that “one idea” and putting into a single sentence that they can share with their colleagues or their clients on social media.
Here’s an example of an idea I had for a blog post: “results are just one form of feedback that clients get from their environment and coaches can create many more opportunities to get clients positive feedback if they create autonomy-supportive environments that reward effort and mastery.”

Here’s my One Sentence: “community is where we look to find out if all this shit is even worth trying to learn.”

That got a lot of shares. Probably because I cursed.

7) **Tell us a story.** Character, conflict, change. The standard story for a good blog post is, “this is how things were. This is what I learned. This is how they are now.” If you’re a researcher, steal a page from the great Pop-Science writers and tell the story of the study. What you assumed, how you tested it, what unexpected thing you learned that changed your assumptions. There’s always a little surprise in every study, and that’s usually what lay-people end up remembering. You should also trim your story to the part that matters. In the example post above, I drastically simplified Vansteenkiste & Deci (2003) to make the point I wanted to make better.

8) **Choose the right pronouns for the right impact.** The right pronoun can bring your audience with you to the next point. The wrong one can make them defensive and primed to reject it. If you’re talking about struggles, use “we.” If you’re talking about
success, use “you.” If you’re talking about grand screw ups, use “I.” We all have problems with this, but I know you’re gonna get it more quickly than I did.

9) **Make it applicable, even if you don’t know how.** Your readers are all busy people who are giving you 5 minutes of their time so they can improve their lives. But the catch is, they might be better equipped to turn your idea into a solution than you are. Being "applicable" doesn’t have to mean solving problems. Being applicable could just mean reframing the problems your readers deal with in a better way. In my example above, I didn’t tell coaches how to create autonomy-supportive environments. That would have been more than one idea. The “applicability” of that post was to point out the problem and introduce a new way of thinking about the spectrum of possible solutions. It’s OK if you don’t have all the answers. By shedding better light on the problems, this group of readers just might find the answers for us all.

10) **Just keep writing.** It’s cliché as hell, but I’m telling you this because I always forget it, too. The more you write consistently, the more consistently you will write. Both in volume and voice. When I am writing every day, I can churn out a 700 word blog post in 45 minutes. I wrote *We Make Communities*, a 60,000 word book in less than 3 weeks. But even as I’m writing this, I can feel how rusty I am. So just keep writing words. It doesn’t matter if anyone sees them, you just need to keep churning out a volume of work. It gets easier, but it never gets easy. Because where would the fun be in that?

All the best,

Coach Stevo